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Choose Your References Wisely

By Kelly Eggers



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One of your first moves when considering a job change should be to review your professional network for people who can serve as references. Prospective employers are likely to ask you for three or four people who can endorse you as a professional.

As you scan your mental rolodex and check through your e-mail contact list, remember that some contacts might be better than others -- and there are a few you shouldn't ask at all. Here are some guidelines from the pros.

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Clients and Customers

Clients and customers can serve as excellent professional references, especially for those who serve in client-facing positions. Asking for a reference from a customer with whom you've developed a long-standing relationship can "let other professionals know who appreciates your work, products or services," says Krista Canfield, a senior public relations Manager at LinkedIn, which allows users to give each other recommendations directly on their profiles. Anyone who can vouch for your professionalism, effective pitching, and product knowledge can be a good reference.

Previous Employers

As long as they're relatively current, references from supervisors and colleagues at your past places of

employment are fair game.

"When you're younger and less experienced, the timeframe for someone who can serve as a reference is shorter," says Roy Cohen, a Wall Street career coach and author of *The Wall Street Professional's Survival Guide*. At that stage, supervisors from short-term internships, for example, are still viable.

As you advance in your career, however, you should keep your contacts current to avoid any misinterpretation.

"When references are five, seven, 10 years old, it makes me wonder what's happened between then and now," says Rusty Rueff, a career and workplace expert with Glassdoor.com, a Sausalito, Calif.-based workplace culture website. "Why can't they find someone more current to speak on their behalf?"

Professors

For recent grads, professors can be an option as a reference -- particularly if their expertise falls in line with the requirements of the job. If you were an English major looking to go into finance however, it gets a little more complicated.

If you took some accounting courses and want to go into finance, you should certainly ask the professors that taught those courses for their support -- as long as you knew them well enough.

"Asking a professor outside of your department demonstrates that you made a strong impression on someone, even if it wasn't your major," says Cohen.

Peers

Some employers ask for references from your current company, which is where the line gets blurry.

Peers are probably your safest bet if asking for a reference inside your company's walls. A close colleague whom you can trust with the knowledge that you're considering leaving can vouch for your ability to work well with others.

"Interviewers are trying to determine how a person will work within their company's culture," says Rueff. "Your peers can talk about what it's like to work with you and how well you assimilated into the company."

Direct Reports

While it's a good idea to provide a reference that can vouch for you as a supervisor, you should be wary of choosing one that is with your current employer.

"I find that asking a current direct report to be a reference crosses a line as a leader and your responsibility to your current company," says Rueff. Asking a subordinate to help you leave your firm doesn't exactly scream "camaraderie."

Instead, get a reference from someone who worked under you at a previous job, as long as it wasn't too long ago.

"[If] your new employer wants someone from your current job, explain your feelings and offer up as many of your current direct reports as they would like after the offer has been made," Rueff says.

Indirect Superiors

This is a risky move -- but if you know that you have the allegiance of someone higher on the totem pole that isn't currently your boss, it's worth asking them to vouch for you. Make sure, however, that their experience with you aligns with the responsibilities you'd hold in a new position. Making a far-off connection between the two weakens the reference altogether.

"For every reference, you'll need to explain the rationale of using them," says Rueff. Make sure that you're able to specifically explain how someone you didn't work for directly is still able to back you as a professional.

Asking for a reference when you haven't yet left your company can be a risky move. All of the experts we spoke with advised the same thing: if you're not openly looking for a job, avoid asking someone in your current company for a reference. Don't be afraid to mention your hesitation in the interview, either -- politely offer up alternative references after explaining that you're in a sensitive situation.

"Make it clear to the person requesting references that you're reluctant to provide a current reference, as it could jeopardize your current position," says Cohen.

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